

up from its chimney. Wordlessly Alyson hung back. Lund reached for her horse's bridle, and they went at a canter across the open. Alyson would have sat her horse, but Lund leaped down from his own mount and raised peremptory arms toward her.

"Come on," he said. "Some of us are expected, anyhow."

The arm that lifted her down remained about her waist and hurried her to the cabin, up its steps, and into its doorway. Lund glanced about him at the four walls, at the preparations for a meal. Then he looked through the window at the back, and saw, on a rock about a hundred yards away, Wace with a field-glass, scanning the easy trail that led up to this spot from the main road and the bungalow.

"Your friend Wace is expecting somebody—that's evident."

Lund's cool voice was scarcely lowered. Alyson pulled free from him and backed away, coming up flattened against the wall beside the door, facing her husband.

sight of Lund, he made the tenderfoot's inevitable hasty motion toward his hip.

"Don't draw," said the big man. "We're friends. Advance, friend."

With the tail of a wary eye, Wace found Alyson. Silently he made a first step, a man trying a bridge. He got into the room finally, both his hands conspicuously in view and empty.

"Well," in a flatted, breathless voice—"this is a surprise!"

LUND shook his head.

"I don't think 'surprise' is the word." He pointed toward the stove with its simmering pot. "I see you've got dinner about ready. We may as well take off our guns while we eat. Come—we'll give 'em to Alyson and let her hang 'em on the wall there."

She came hastily to get them, with a ghastly attempt at her ordinary manner. The red was in her cheeks now in two burning spots below the dark eyes. She was very wonderful to look at.

displayed a fair imitation of his usual swagger.

Lund ate heartily and praised the food. Alyson left her plate almost untouched, but drank the coffee and poured a second and stronger cup. Wace excused his poor appetite on the score of a late breakfast.

When they had finished, Lund leaned suddenly forward in his chair, and brought his fist down softly close to Wace's hand.

"You haven't told how you happened to be here," he said, looking squarely into the other man's face.

"No." A covert glance went Alyson's way.

"Alyson knows." Lund's gaze followed his.

Alyson sat staring down at her plate, and both men stared at her.

"Didn't you promise to meet Alyson here to-day at noon?" Lund leaned farther across the table and shot out the words. "No, you don't!" he countered, as he saw the other's eye go swiftly to the pistols hanging on the wall. "We'll have no gun play. It's man to man."

All three were on their feet now—Alyson retreating from the table step by step toward the wall on the side where the weapons hung. Wace attempted to swing around toward her, and Lund, never looking that way, blocked him.

"I told you we'd have no gun play," he repeated.

"A gun's no argument."

"Argument?" Wace caught at the word. "Yes, it seems to me that in our age of the world people ought to be able to settle a thing like this reasonably. Lys married you on the understanding—"

"You, let the understanding between Alyson and me alone," cut in Lund. "Stick to what's between you and me."

"Damn you!" flared Wace. "You don't bully me, Kortney Lund. You're not talking to a woman that you can browbeat. You're speaking to a man now."

"All right," agreed Lund, without any apparent intention to be insulting. "I'll let you pass for a man. If you want to make anything of it, go ahead. State your case."

Wace tried again.

"You and Lys were married at high noon, exactly a year ago to-day. The agreement was—"

"I told you not to say that!" Lund interrupted. "On what grounds do you make an agreement between my wife and me any business of yours?"

Anger glared in Wace's arrogant eye, but fear was there, too.

"Well—you can't say it's nothing to her. Lys, why don't you speak up to him?"

Again Lund shook his head.

"I wonder at you, Wace," he said. "You lack tact—and that's the truth. Whatever you do, you oughtn't to take back-water before her—try to shove her in front of you."

Lund turned a slow, contemptuous eye toward the noon-mark. On the instant Wace leaped for his gun, got it, and when Lund whirled round on him it was to confront that most dangerous of adversaries—a hideously scared man struggling with shaking hands to drag the weapon from its holster.

"Drop that gun!"

Lund, crouching a bit to launch himself upon the other, felt the butt of his own pistol come pat into his palm. He swung up its muzzle; when Wace had his gun free of the holster he found himself already covered.

"Drop it!" Lund repeated his order. "Drop it, and back out of the door."

"Lys!" Wace called, as his weapon rattled on the boards. "Lys, come on."

Lund's eyes did not leave the figure of the man backing through the door, but he was aware of Alyson's stirring where she stood.

"Come on," Wace spoke, as his heel met the threshold, and his hands went up to the jambs to steady him for the step down. "Make him keep his promise and let you walk out. Don't stay there to be killed."

The last words came to them when Wace was on the path outside, running toward the thicket where his saddled horse waited—not once looking behind him. Lund lowered his weapon, strode to the door, and slammed it, then turned back to Alyson.

"Don't be scared," he said gently. "I won't kill you."

"I wish you would! Oh, Kort, I wish you would!—if you can't—can't—"

HE had constrained himself not to touch her. Now he caught her suddenly in his arms, and a swift hand went over her mouth. For a long moment he held her so. Then her closed lids raised, and they looked into each other's eyes.

"Don't say it," he whispered. "I can't." Then—as she moved in his arms and moaned: "God knows, I want to be good to you; but I can't do that."

Alyson pushed away his hand. "The year!" she gasped. "The year!"

"Poor girl!" He cherished her tear-bathed face in a cupping palm. "You want to be loose—and I'm going to hang on to you as long as there's breath in my body!"

"Kort!"

"Don't say any awful thing to me, dear," he broke in on her. "I'm hanging on. I'll never give you up. It may make you hate me—it's going to hurt if you downright hate me. But I'll never give you up."

"Do you think I want to be given up?" There was no mistaking her vehemence, the hysteric energy of her tone.

For the first moment Lund dared to slacken his hold. He pushed her back, staring into her face.

"What did you say—that about a year—a time marriage—for?" incredulously.

She burst from his hand, plunging at him, catching him, burying her face against him, crying out:

"To make you fight it! To make you say no. Oh—oh—oh! You said yes! You agreed!"

"I'd have agreed to anything."

"You didn't mean it? You haven't been fixing things at the mine so you'd be free—so you could leave me?"

"Alyson!"

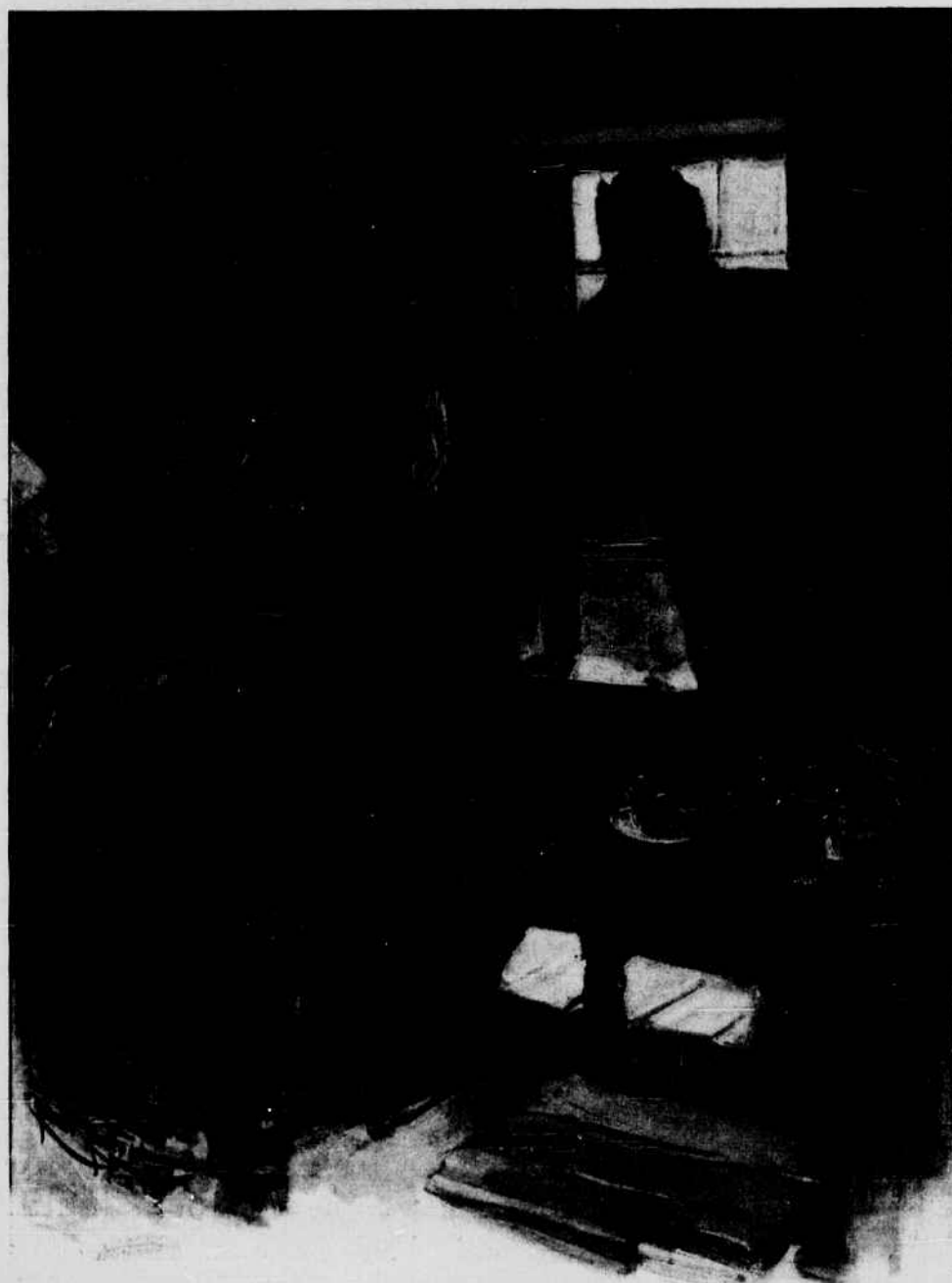
"Well, the year was about over—and you'd never said a word—and you seemed so busy and preoccupied. I almost went crazy. And you said for me to invite somebody. So—Stan had been writing—and I thought you were tired of me. And you didn't say you loved me."

"Love you! Why, child, what do you think made me act the brute to you this way—dragging you round with me for three whole days—running the chance of killing that fool or having him blow the top of my head off?"

"Oh, I saw you were furious. Another man—your pride—"

"Pride!" he burst in on her, gathering her close in his arms, dropping to the window-bench to cradle her. "When it comes to you, I've got no pride. There's never been the minute since I first saw you that I wouldn't have crawled to get you."

He rocked her softly, his cheek against hers. Through the window they saw far below a little moving cloud of dust—an unskilled horseman who flogged a trail-wise, indignant pony downhill.



"Drop that gun! Drop it, and back out of the door."

Lund continued to stand in the middle of the room and look through the window, his fingers busy with the buckle of his pistol-belt, whose holster was slipped around in front.

"Our man's left his lookout"—wheeling slowly to command the open door. "Here he comes, expecting—expecting—expecting somebody! But I hardly think he's expecting me."

No answer—no sound in the room. "Whoosh! He's seen the horses!"

There was an exclamation outside, then running feet, and Wace came jumping up the steps sidewise, entering shoulder first.

"Lys!" he cried. Then, as he caught

Wace went to the stove in the corner, where the bubbling saucepan sent out the odor of that hunter's stew the making of which was his boasted accomplishment.

"Too bad I let the pack go—we had a can of peaches left this morning," Lund said. "Well, I've got some cheese in my saddle pockets. I'll get that."

He surveyed the two with an enigmatic gaze, then left them—Wace at the stove, mechanically stirring his stew, Alyson getting out a third tin plate from the cupboard. When he came back the board was in order, the savory mess dished up. Wace pulled himself together, and now